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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 003139

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: INEC'S PROBLEMS INSURMOUNTABLE?

REF: A. ABUJA 2989

1B. ABUJA 2739

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons: 1.5 (B&D).

NIGERIA: INEC'S PROBLEMS INSURMOUNTABLE?

REF: A) Abuja 2989; B) Abuja 2739

11. (C) SUMMARY: Nigeria's INEC faces logistical roadblocks as it tries to conduct elections at all three tiers of government in 2003. These obstacles include a critical cash shortfall, a flawed registration process, and the Augean task of processing 70 million voter registration forms. The absence of effective leadership by the Commission combines with manipulative activity by some actors to threaten the 2003 electoral calendar with disruption. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Nigeria's Independent National Election Commission (INEC) faces many challenges in its efforts to stage local, state and national elections in 2003. No visible activity has taken place, and insiders tell Poloff that INEC is paralyzed by its efforts to produce a voters list. Further, according to a report published in "The Guardian," a Lagos-based national newspaper, INEC Director of Finance Olusegun Akanni testified during hearings at the House of Representatives that "next year's elections may be in doubt, given an array of problems as yet unaddressed." Among Akanni's worries is INEC's lack of a budget. Akanni testified that INEC needed 19.8 billion Naira to complete "compilation of the voters register" and to purchase elections materials. According to reports of his testimony, Akanni said that Nigeria had yet to order the estimated 600,000 ballot boxes which it will need to import ahead of elections.

13. (C) During the September voters' registration exercise, INEC Chairman Abel Guobadia admitted problems and cited shortages of registration materials. At that time he blamed "politicians" for hoarding materials illegally and other efforts to manipulate the registration process. But six weeks after the exercise, Guobadia told a group of concerned Ambassadors that the registration was not flawed and blamed troublemakers for criticizing the lack of materials and other problems with the process (Ref A).

14. (C) During the exercise, diplomats had observed many locations in Lagos, Niger, and Nasarawa states and in the Federal Capital Territory where materials were not available.

Estimates of unregistered voters by local poll-workers consistently ranged from 40 to 60 percent of eligible adults (Ref B). This estimate is consistent with those made by other interest groups, including the North's Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) and the Southeast's Ohaneze Ndigbo.

15. (C) Subsequent to the September 22 closure of voters registration, INEC failed to produce the preliminary list for public scrutiny on September 26, the originally promised date.

According to an employee of the South African company contracted to provide registration materials, computers and technical support, INEC had yet to begin processing the approximately 60 million registration forms as of November 4. Moreover, an INEC staffer told Poloff that serious processing deficiencies remain as of the end of October. He recounted a test, performed around October 20, which required him to fill in three separate forms with his own thumbprint to test the biometric discrimination capabilities of the system. According to him, the thumbprints, taken in the controlled environment of his office, all passed the system designed to ferret out multiple registrations. "The fingerprints from the field are not that consistent and are likely to prove unusable," he commented.

16. (C) While most of the completed registration forms have been collected in Abuja, some reportedly have yet to arrive. Other problems remain. Poloff encountered several people in Plateau state who claimed to have sold their temporary voters identifications to "politicians." The forms themselves may present another obstacle. According to an INEC information technician, the OMR (optical magnetic reader) forms are too thin and could jam the scanners. Further, he commented, he believes that the variance of the forms is over the threshold for OMR scanning, about 1.5 millimeters.

17. (C) Even if INEC is able to overcome these problems, the logistical nightmare of compiling a list of 60 million voters still looms. Assuming a rate of one form every 10 seconds and operating 16 hours per day, a total of 10,416 computer/days will be required to process the forms. If, as INEC asserts, processing has begun, it is (just) possible to finish by the late-December deadline. However, if Embassy sources are correct in saying that batch processing has yet to begin, the task becomes enormous. Almost 250 separate processors and OMR readers would need to function flawlessly, without a network failure or other difficulty, to meet the newest late-December date for publishing the list. Printing the lists would require a similar amount of computing power. The technicians at INEC and with the South African company have been unable to verify whether the computerization of INEC would allow for parallel processing of forms or for collating a master database list for the entire country.

COMMENT

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18. (C) Even if the biometric characteristics could be distinguished (unlikely, for reasons given above), it is all but inconceivable that INEC has sufficient computing power at its command to scrutinize and validate 60-plus million forms. (Estimates of forms submitted range from 60 to 67 million.) INEC and Nigeria are faced with a daunting task if Nigeria is to hold elections in time for a May 29 handover, when the current Administration's constitutional term of office expires. If worse-case estimates of under- and multiple-registration are to be believed, as many as half of the 60 million voters registrations could be invalid and an equal number of voters could have been disenfranchised. These are the worst-case numbers, and it probably is not that bad. However, the public at large increasingly mistrusts INEC and appears ready to believe almost any charge of incompetence or malfeasance. Without firm support by Nigeria's political leadership, tacit or explicit agreement among elites to scale back manipulation, a more confident yet less officious INEC and a concomitant provision of adequate resources quickly, Nigeria's Fourth Republic could be headed for a disruption of the 2003 electoral calendar.

JETER